TOWN & COUNTRY CHURCH

These Papers

BECAUSE of wartime printing conditions, it has been found necessary to issue TOWN AND COUNTRY CHURCH as a bulletin without regular monthly frequency. We expect, however, to be able to make available a series of informal papers, and to print nine of these issues in the course of twelve months, as we had planned and promised. The Committee on Town and Country of the Home Missions Council, the Federal Council of Churches and the International Council of Religious Education asks you to be patient if copies do not arrive regularly.

Brief stories of what people are doing in local congregations and communities will be the chief features. The aim is to help put the worker in the small community into touch with numerous activities.

Part of Larger Program

The paper will be an important part of an enlarged "cooperative rural church program," that will encourage a national "rural church movement." The paper will be closely linked with a regularly held National Convocation on the Church in Town and Country.

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This Issue
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The Place of the Church in the Rural Community

WILLIAM V. DENNIS

An address delivered by Professor Dennis of the Pennsylvania State College before the Home Missions Council of North America in January, 1945.

• The time has come to take seriously, very seriously, the injunction of Saint Paul to the church at Ephesus, "Wherefore, putting away falsehood speak ye truth each one with his neighbor, for we are members one of another." Whatever our denominational tags, we in this gathering at least are "members one of another."

It is most essential, therefore, that here and now we dispense with the conventional polite euphemisms, and strip off the camouflage we have in recent years erected over the rural church, and face the facts just as they are. I shall not tell the whole truth, for I do not know it all, nor if I did could I compass it in this short period; but I most fervently hope to tell nothing but the truth. In the words of James Boyd, the poet,

"In a twisted world what matters most
Is simple statement, open to the least of men."

Comfortable Adjustment

During the past 100 years of the industrial era the church has made a very comfortable adjustment to the materialism which has become the dominant force of the twentieth century. In the attempt to save for itself a respectable place among the *modern* institutions it has progressively been losing its real life. Having spent its "ancient dower of inward happiness," and having surrendered its authoritative position as spokesman for truth and justice, the Protestant church is not considered an important agency in the planning for the postwar community.

These sentences are my preface to a bluntly stated, disheartening thesis: that judged by any currently accepted standards of value the Protestant rural church is no longer a significant institution, either to the rural community where it stands or to American society as a whole. Let us without sentimental bias, but dispassionately and with honest appraisal, apply some essential standards of value to this institution to which we have rendered so much lip service.

A. *The church building.* The building itself, often presenting an irresistible appeal because it still speaks eloquently of a great faith of bygone years, is in the vast majority of cases inadequate within in structure, in equipment, and in appearance conducive to worship. In most areas it runs a poor third with dairy barns and poultry houses, as do most farm homes.

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Church Not Supported

B. *The support by the community.* Measured by this yardstick the rural church presents a pathetic picture. The attitudes of rural communities are certainly reflected in the small proportion of the rural population in functioning membership and activity. Recent studies in the northeastern area reveal entire counties with as few as 30 per cent of the total population even registered as church members, little as that term means in so many cases.

Wherever the percentage of membership in church approximates 40 or 50 per cent of the population, more than one half, sometimes as much as two thirds, of this church membership is in the Roman Catholic church. In those counties where the smallest percentage of church membership is in the Roman Catholic church, there the highest pro-

portion of the population is not in membership in any church. Nothing could speak more forcibly of the failure of the Protestant church to fulfill its function in rural America than these facts.

Nor do we find any comfort in examining the data concerning the financial support of the minister by the local congregations or by the overhead church organizations. Full confirmation of the church's low estimate of the rural church is found in the statistical material already made public. Make all the allowances you dare to to offset the inaccuracies of these published data, it still remains a demonstrable truth that urban churches expended in recent years for pastors and other salaries four to five times more per church on the average than was spent per rural church.

Hopeless Salaries

One of the largest denominations that expended over one and one-half millions of dollars in 1943 for Home Missions, used more than 52 per cent of the money to pay salaries of rural pastors and community workers in rural areas. Yet in spite of such subsidies, rural ministers in that group and in all others are paid hopelessly inadequate salaries. Less than two weeks ago I sat in conference with a group including presidents of theological seminaries, seminary professors, and church leaders of seven or eight denominations. An official of one of the largest of these spoke with evident pride of his recent success in raising the salary of a rural pastor from $800 to $1,300, adding, "He doubtless will still find it *somewhat* of a problem to get along!" This in one of the richest states of the union, where city churches within that denomination pay from $12,000 to $15,000 a year to the preacher and in addition hire assistants to aid in running the machinery of their large organizations. Measured by the yardstick of local and national financial support, the rural church is of very little importance.

Some may attempt to argue that the slender financial support received by the rural church is due to the fact that our agriculture is "sick," as Mark A. Dawber has described it. While admitting the measure of truth in such a defense, I insist that the fundamental cause of the church's malady, "the mother spot" in the physician's language, is something very different than distribution, than the indices of costs of production and prices received for farm products. It is rather the "sickness" of the church that is the basic difficulty. As Dr. Woodlock has said, "For at least four centuries there has been in progress an evaporation of Christendom, of Christian belief from men's thinking which has finally led to the development of a philosophy that denies the very existence of all religious truths."

What Influence?

C. Effective influence on the life of community. Our inherited belief that the church is of paramount importance to the community has been sadly reduced to wishful thinking. The presence of church buildings in a rural area, the coming and going of ministers of rival denominations, and the maintenance of the outward forms of church activity have not sufficed to prevent the disintegration of home life, the increase of delinquency, and the growing secularization of life, for which religion has no relevancy.

A recent incident, untypical only in the brutal cynicism of the speaker, indicates the increasing unrelatedness of the church to community affairs. The occasion was the meeting of 70 elected representatives of 35 organizations in a town to organize a council for postwar planning. The objectives of the council were outlined by a university professor who is aiding Chambers of Commerce and other civic bodies in large towns and cities to set up similar councils. Said he, "Let it be clearly understood from the outset that only practical considerations, frankly selfish motives, must guide your planning; there is no place for idealism in this picture. As for you do-gooders, get out! You are no damn good to this enterprise!"

Among the elected delegates in front of him were the Community Red Cross nurse, the school nurse, a Protestant minister, several school and college teachers of known humanitarian character, and volunteer welfare workers—all of them "do-gooders." The large local ministerium was not even invited to send delegates to the council! To very many of the effective leaders of today's activities the Protestant church, divided against itself, seems to have little constructive influence on the life of the community, and has therefore in their minds no significant part in postwar planning. "By their fruits ye shall know them."

Theological Seminaries

D. The influence of theological seminaries. With very little exception even today, the theological seminaries are not training their students for rural work. The governing bodies of our seminaries are still very reluctant to recognize the need for any form of special training for rural work in spite of the fact that a large proportion of their graduates receive some of their practical experience in town and open country churches. The great challenge of the rural field, an adequate realization of the essential position in the church held by the town and country work, the noble concept of the rural pastorate as a life-time job, none of these great motives receives effective presentation in our seminaries. Whatever lip service is rendered the rural church is vitiated by the failure of the seminary to make adequate provision for the training of men to undertake work in rural fields. Before their seminary days are over the candidates for the ministry are fully aware that their professional recognition, as well as their financial reward, depends upon their securing an urban location. As a result of this very definite urbanward set within the seminaries, men entering the ministry continue to regard a rural appointment as temporary and far too small an opportunity for their talents and abilities.

Denominational Leaders

E. Attitudes and policies of denominational leaders. Perhaps the most startling evidence of the insignificant position and function of the rural church is revealed by the attitudes and policies of the leaders of

the Protestant denominations. Do not be deceived by, nor overestimate the importance of, the activity in behalf of the rural church to be noted in certain quarters. For in spite of the sincerity with which some groups are trying to aid struggling rural churches and their pastors, their understanding of the situation and their budgets for effective work are both pathetically restricted.

Regardless of all the pretty words we have used, and the platitudinous sympathy we extend to the rural pastor, most executives of the Protestant churches do not have a high regard for him, his capacities or his work. There is a fundamental insincerity at the core of our Protestant attitudes toward the rural church. We don't respect it; we don't honestly believe in it; we have a patronizing attitude towards it. Just as soon as a rural pastor demonstrates signs of initiative, push, alertness, social fitness, we snatch him quickly from the threatened blight that will destroy him if he should remain in a field "too narrow for a man of his abilities." As if there *ever* were a rural pastor *big* enough for the opportunities that are his, unless it were a John Frederick Oberlin!

Catholic Bishops

An indication of the small place the rural church occupies in the minds of our denominational executives is seen in their almost complete absence from the two national convocations on the rural church held in 1943 and 1944. I believe I am correct in saying that not a single bishop or high-placed executive attended these great meetings, whereas at Cincinnati a few weeks ago, at the sessions of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference 17 bishops were present representing rural areas throughout the United States.

Of much of our rural work we speak in terms of *missions*—home missions. Both the connotations and the practices involved create in many a rural mind a sense of belittlement and inferiority as regards the church. The subsidized pastors, as subsidies are now administered, are as men on relief, objects of charity; and any self-respecting man justly resents such a status.

We who are so busily occupied keeping in motion the vast machinery of our religious organizations seem tragically unaware that most of it is running in neutral, not operating to prevent wars, to eliminate racial conflicts, to bring fair play into our industrial order, to lift agriculture to its rightful place and reward, to stimulate righteous legislative policies and to champion justice for all people.

To more than three fourths of our population, if they pay any attention at all to the church, it is "much ado about nothing."

Five Minutes to Twelve

Perhaps some of you will say, "You are not telling us anything new; we've heard these criticisms before." To you I have two things to say: One, I did not come here to criticize, but to speak in behalf of an institution I love and that I see hurt and in great need. Two, if you've heard these things before, why haven't you gone *crusading* to forestall what is now happening? Why with prophetic insight and heroic courage haven't you attacked the citadels of ignorance and conservatism even in high places? I think I know, and I say this without imputation of any mean motives or cowardly weakness. The urgency of the need and the lateness of the hour impel me to speak. It is indeed "five minutes to twelve."

These statements are not unqualifiedly true; there are notable exceptions, thank God, which give some ground for hope that the rural church may again be a powerful factor in shaping rural life. But the most notable of these exceptions are relatively small and inconspicuous, often almost hidden in the remote areas. Such a work is that of the Rev. Ben Deaton, in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. Humble, utterly unselfish, a twentieth century St. Francis, he has portrayed and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ until its transforming power has lifted the moral levels of the whole district, improved the economic life, opened the minds and brought hope and comfort to the souls of his hill-country people. There are others. Unhappily these are not the men and women we reckon great, nor are we impelled by their example to go and do likewise.

Recovering Soul

Does all this mean that in the shaping of postwar rural life the church has no significant part to play? Because long before humanity "struck its tents" and started its march into an unpredictable future the church faltered and then fell far behind the vanguard, has it forfeited its claim on man's loyalty and lost its peculiar and most essential function for the children of men? The answer to these and other most pertinent questions depends upon the decisions made in these turbulent years by church leaders and church laymen. If the existing unholy alliance between the church and the dominant materialism of our time continues, if the church and the Christendom for which it speaks cannot somehow recover its Christian soul, both the church and Western civilization are doomed to die. Unless our ministers can discover the lost radiance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaim it with fearlessness and with the power of complete conviction, and exemplify it with the love and sacrificial spirit of St. Francis, a hurrying humanity avidly seeking to find comfort and security here in a world they see and feel, in their efforts to build here their paradise will increasingly ignore the church.

Of course they as well as we are doomed if our real, honest-to-goodness hope for power and security is in the marvelous instruments of our invention; for every scientific improvement we achieve is fraught with increasing danger unless accompanied by a greater self-knowledge, self-discipline and self-giving.

All of us here present today will agree that the one institution in society that can inspire us to "greater self-knowledge, self-discipline and self-giving" is the church in which is preached and the membership of which portrays in word and deeds the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of course such a church is central in any community, be it city or country. And it is in rural America that the hope of extending and maintaining a dynamic Christianity now lies. Protestant Christianity has never been real-

ly at home in the cities. The city churches have survived until this present only because of the steady stream of new life which has flowed into them from rural areas. But, it is becoming increasingly clear that if present trends continue the city churches cannot count much longer on this sort of renewal. The decline in the farm population, the lowering net reproduction rate in rural areas, and the spread of paganism among rural peoples mean just one thing for the urban church—ultimate dissolution.

Summons to Rededication

All that you aim for in postwar rural life, an extended and more suitable rural education, more adequate provisions for sound health, a constructive and more nearly just land policy, the elimination of racial discrimination, the development of community and the elevation of all rural living to levels in which personalities may find opportunity for full growth—these and other aims can be achieved only if and when the hearts and minds of those who labor for them are inspired and governed by the spirit of Christ himself.

The summons to repentance and the rededication of all we have and are comes first and *now* to us, to all of us, whether high placed or inconspicuous in lay work, "standing in the need of prayer," threatened with professionalization and half-crazed with activity, having no time for listening to the still small voice nor for learning of Him. He alone can teach us the way in the murk and misery of these strangely terrible days. I think most of us have forgotten that we cannot learn the way nor enter in except we become as little children.

The church and its authoritative and compelling power was central in our early rural life; it can regain that status; it must be re-established at the center of rural life. Here is the greatest challenge before the Protestant church in the United States in this hour. No longer the sole active agency for upholding and extending Christianity in rural areas, the Protestant church must recognize the greatness of its obligation, the richness of its opportunity, the heroic proportions of its task. To meet this challenge and to enter effectively upon the accomplishment of its task, we must become a Protestant church genuinely united in all possible forms of service. New attitudes must be shaped, new methods of approach be devised, new roads must be travelled. Here is all the thrill and all the joy of high adventure!

Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless, O Soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul! O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but *safe!* are they not all the seas of God?

—From "Passage to India" by Walt Whitman

Rural Culture Needs the Church

• Destructive processes are at work in country and village life. Rural life requires a church which is concerned with the daily problems of the countryside—land use, soil conservation, market improvement and resettlement.

Country life needs the rural church because it is in danger of losing its soul, its rural soul. The farmer is losing his *farmer's soul* when he ceases to love and preserve the fertility of his farm. When soil erosion sets in the farmer is losing more than his land, he is losing something of himself which only the church can help him to regain.

The poor farmer must have the church to strengthen his spirit in the midst of insecurity and landlessness. The fortunate farmer needs a religious inspiration in a time when the changing social order is tearing him away from old moorings. He needs spiritual help when he is tempted to "chisel" in his struggle for government benefits or to exploit the land for selfish gains.

—Thomas Alfred Tripp

A Message of 1911

• In the course of some historical reading the Managing Editor came across the following statement in the introduction to the book, *Some Famous Country Parishes,* by Ezra S. Tipple. Dr. Tipple's book was about six famous country parishes in England. His reference to the country church situation in the United States in 1911 was as follows:

"There is new interest everywhere in the country parish and the country church. In recent years the modern city, with its amazing growth, its appalling religious destitution, its multitudinous needs, and its dire menace, has largely engaged the attention of Christian workers. Now, however, with almost startling suddenness, Christian people are awakening to the fact that there are problems of the country also quite as immediate, as threatening, and as imperious. There are problems of a declining population, of lack of workers, of poor financial methods and inadequate resources, of the maintenance of too many churches in dwindling communities, of buildings unfitted for modern forms of church work, of scandalously underpaid ministers, and many other problems which have sprung out of the changed conditions of country life and the readjustment of the times."

Victorious Living

• Many radio stations are carrying a five-minute dramatic broadcast of actual religious experiences under the general theme of "Victorious Living." The program has been begun over 24 local stations in 13 states, it is announced by Rev. Philip C. Landers, Director of Public Relations of the International Council of Religious Education, 203 North Wabash Avenue, Chicago 1, Illinois.

Town & Country Church

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